

Women who **Lead**

Amplifying and Accelerating
Women's Interests

**November
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Introduction

Research has mapped the individual, institutional, and cultural challenges faced by women in Ireland that aspire to enter (and stay in) political life^{1 2}. This includes an examination of the implications of the gender quota for national politics, which took effect for the first time in the 2016 General Election³, that indicated limitations yet also its power to increase the numbers of women in political office.⁴ While women in all their diversity remain underrepresented⁵, their presence in politics has had impact on delivering policies that are of interest and benefit for women, or what has been referred to as *substantive representation of women's interests*^{6 7}.

1 Buckley & Keenan 2021; McGing and Keenan 2022; Cullen and McGing 2024

2 Buckley and Keenan (2021) refer to recruitment, resources, and resistance as barriers to women candidates. Family, friends, assistance with care responsibilities, job flexibility, financial supports, and personal networks were essential in advancing candidacy.

3 <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2012/act/36/section/42/enacted/en/html>

4 Mariani et al 2021; Brennan et al 2023; Buckley 2025

5 Cullen and Gough 2022; Cullen 2025

6 Catalano Weeks and Homola 2022; Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005

7 Substantive representation is defined as the inclusion of women's interests and demands on the political agenda.

Executive Summary:

Women leaders tend to diversify policy agendas, increase their parties' emphasis on social justice issues, and initiate more family-friendly and feminist policies. Research indicates that this relationship between descriptive representation—the number of women in political institutions—and substantive representation—the inclusion of women's interests and demands on the political agenda is contingent and complex. This leads to debates about whether we should link the 'who' of politics with the 'what' of policy making, however evidence points in the direction that capacitating progressive women to lead in public life leads to women friendly policies.

Key insights from research on substantive representation of women include:

- It is often an outcome of the collective work that happens in political institutions especially when women leaders work together inside and outside of parliaments.
- Women leaders also work in institutions that are gendered and to deliver responsive policy making must have access to power.
- Measures of substantive representation of women should also include not just what women leaders say and do but the processes they use to consult and incorporate women's views and organisations into policy making.
- When defining what substantive representation of women means it is important to understand 'women's issues' as topics that disproportionality affect women in all their diversity.

Informed by these insights this report examines evidence in Ireland for the relationship between women's political presence as leaders and policies that advance gender equality. It concludes that despite the over representation of men in politics in Ireland, women leaders in politics, civil service and civil society have allied to advance gender equality policies.

Drawing from research on women leaders and policy change this report identified two cases studies. 1. Repeal of the Eighth Amendment 2. Ratification of the Istanbul Treaty and establishment of establishment of the state DSGBV agency Cuan that show where and how women leaders set agendas, frame narratives, collaborate, and network to deliver substantive representation for women.

The evidence base of the report includes qualitative thematic analysis of debates of the Oireachtas (Parliament) Joint Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution and key developments in Oireachtas debates on the ratification of

the Istanbul Convention and the establishment of the Cuan and pre-legislative scrutiny of Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Agency Bill May 2023. This approach underlined the *turning points* in legislative processes where women leaders' presence translated into acts that shifted the dial to deliver an outcome reflecting broader societal and feminist aims.

The case studies identified how women leaders (building on long fought civil society campaigns) acted as *amplifiers and accelerants* – on reproductive rights and on the issue of DSGBV to unstick and progress women's interests.

- In **case 1** women leaders worked to support a new way to talk about abortion in Ireland in a parliamentary context that moved beyond polarising debates and progressed the proposed referendum on repeal.
- In **case 2** women leaders in parliament, civil society and survivors allied with women's ministerial initiative to use parliamentary rules and procedures to push beyond obstacles to ratify international law and policy change on DSGBV.

The cases reveal evidence for the role of women leaders as 'agents of change' who work to advance policy in the context of 'agents of inertia' that have acted as a 'drag' on advancing gender equality policies. These included strategies of *using feminist 'knowledge' including experiential and legal expertise: 'coalition-building' across parties and with women leaders in civil society, and in public life and 'rulemaking' and rule breaking of parliamentary procedures to deliver progressive policy change.*

The research underscores the importance of engagement between women politicians and feminist and pro-equality civil society to offer constitutive representation that captures the realities of women's marginalised experiences.

Findings include that progressive women leaders must be buoyed by broader political will and commitment and have access and power to articulate women's interests in responsive and inclusive terms.

Recommendations

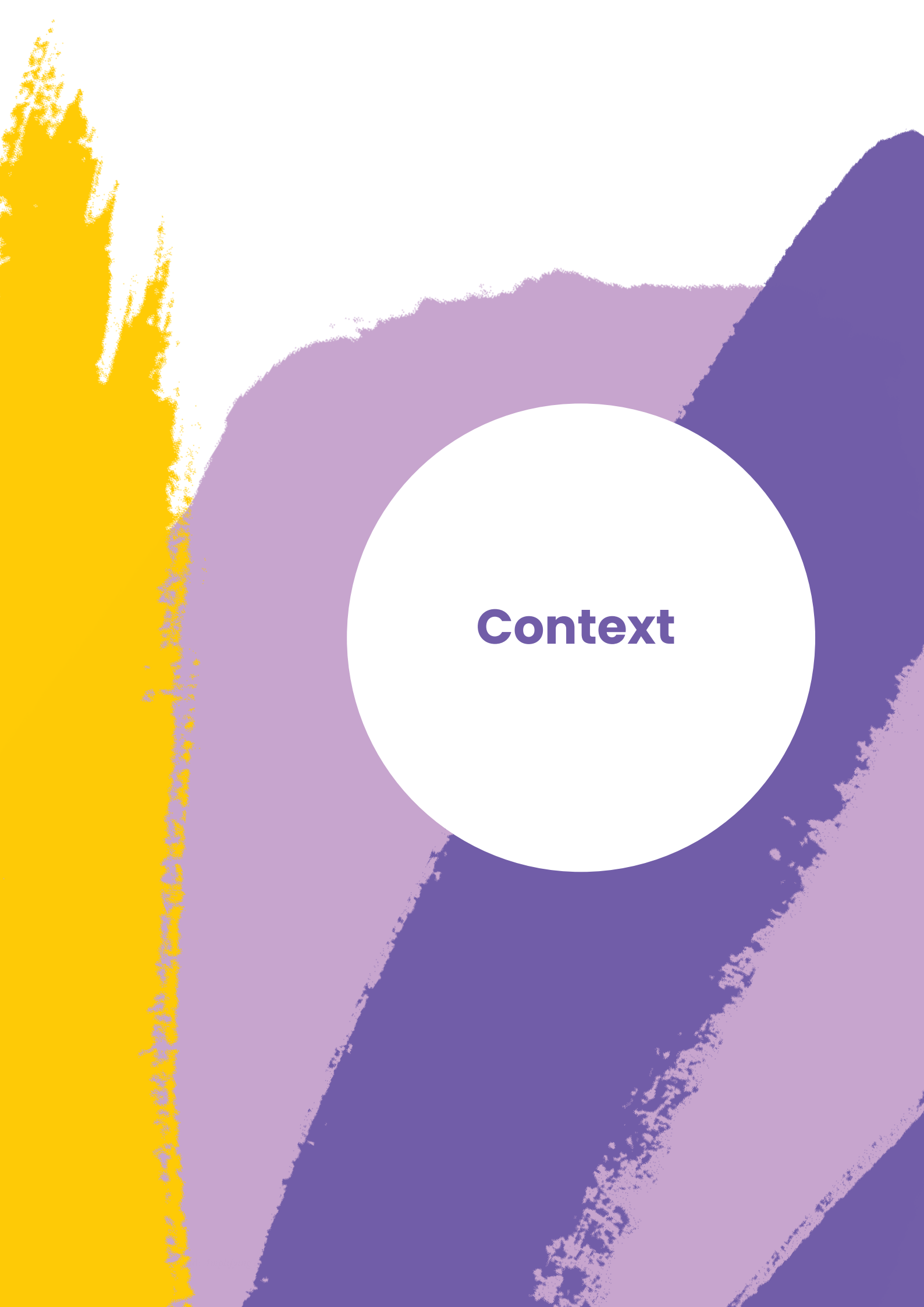
Create inclusive parliamentary spaces where diverse progressive women leaders are capacitated to lead by:

- Establishing gender quotas and diversity targets at all levels of politics.
- Enabling women leaders to access power and influence through gender parity commitments (in cabinets, committee portfolios, and chair positions).
- Empowering women politicians to lead under equitable and safe conditions by implementing recommendations of the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament and the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life; Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality and the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality on Women in Leadership and Decision Making.
- Exploring the potential of feminist democratic innovations to embed gender equality principles in parliaments and strengthen mechanisms for feminist actors to participate in legislative and political consultations.

The institutionalisation of gender equality machinery and policy processes and practices are essential to actualizing women's progressive leadership through:

- Dedicated and resourced unit in government to advance gender responsive policy making, gender mainstreaming and intersectional analysis of policy.
- Developing systems of co-design in policy making that ensures collaboration with securely resourced and valued feminist civil society organisations in all their diversity.





Context

Context

Parliamentarians have long been overwhelmingly men, and many countries have only recently seen increases in women's representation, often due to quotas. Research has shown that there are behavioural and attitudinal differences in how women and men speak in parliament⁸ and which issues they focus on.⁹

While women politicians are heterogeneous as a group, they have different policy positions from male colleagues¹⁰, and a sudden increase in women's descriptive representation, for example through the introduction of quotas, can have a substantial effect on healthcare and military spending.¹¹ A more diverse parliamentary delegation is connected to a broader set of policy issues addressed in party manifestos.¹²

Brown et al (2023) argue that the presence of Black women in elected office in the United States has transformed democratic institutions. For instance, Black maternal health is an issue that Black female politicians working in a Black maternal health caucus placed on political agendas for the first time.¹³ Empirical studies then find that women legislators are more likely to support and pursue women-friendly policies. They build consensus around shared interests, compromise on legislation, and represent women's interests through the bills they sponsor and co-sponsor^{14 15} and through symbolic acts such as floor speeches that focus on women and girls.¹⁶ The presence of women leaders is also shown to reduce gender gaps in voting, encouraging women to vote.¹⁷ Other evidence shows a descriptive representation loop wherein the presence of women seems to attract more women into political positions.¹⁸ The physical presence and the ways in which women leaders conduct themselves in politics can also have an effect on their male colleagues.¹⁹

Women leaders, in addition, may play important roles in addressing political inequalities in representation.²⁰ The value of the presence of individuals from marginalised groups in policymaking positions lies in its potential to deliver better outcomes for those groups than individuals from dominant groups.^{21 22}

All this said scholars are cautious to make links between women's presence and gender policies, indicating a *contingent rather than causal link*, as there are many conditions that may need to be in place for women to 'act' on women's interests.

8 Hargrave and Blumenau, 2022

9 Bäck et al 2014; Mendelberg et al 2014

10 Homola 2019

11 Clayton and Zetterberg 2018

12 Greene and O'Brien 2016

13 Brown et al 2023, p 1236

14 Holman, Mahoney, and Hurler 2022

15 Wackerle (2023) using data from 14 European parliaments between 1987 and 2021, looks at the extent to which the behaviour of female and male members of parliament (MPs) in co-sponsorship differs. He finds that women are more likely than men to take part in the co-sponsoring of bills, and even more so with other women. Furthermore, the nature of the co-sponsored bills can be said to help increase the substantive representation of women. The analysis shows that women are generally more likely to collaborate and preferably do so with other women.

16 Dietrich, Hayes, and O'Brien 2019

17 Wolbrecht and Campbell 2025

18 Pereira and Mosquera 2025

19 Jakimow 2022

20 Young 1990, p. 175

21 Mansbridge 1999

22 E.g., Brown et al 2024.

This includes whether they have influence, what the broader political institutions demand of them, the specific policy issue at stake and resistance to implementing a gendered political agenda²³ particularly in the face of radical right opposition to gender equality.²⁴

In fact, the relation between the presence of women leaders in politics and if they ‘deliver’ gender equality policies is a source of disagreement among scholars. Those that have found tangible evidence of how women leaders deliver on policies for women argue that sometimes such disagreements are a function in part of “variation in the issues or areas studied and different methodologies used to measure women’s political presence.”²⁵ Some research suggests that such a link can be seen best when there is a critical mass of women, when their numbers pass a threshold then institutions change. However, others indicate that more women in politics can also dampen men’s interest in advancing gender equality (they assume women politicians will do it) and or hostility and ‘back lash’ can also hamper women politician’s efforts.²⁶ Other factors such as whether women politicians have a feminist perspective, the ideology of the party they belong to, the nature of relations with feminist civil society and the existence of state gender equality ‘machinery’ have all been indicated as important beyond actual numbers of women leaders in effectively representing women’s interests. In sum it is most likely that all of these elements interacting together and especially the alliances that women establish among themselves from the different spaces they occupy—or presences—is in fact decisive in promoting gender equality.²⁷ Following other assessments then this research report draws on a broad account of women’s political presence that includes women in executive leadership and in representative positions but underlines the importance of women leaders in civil service, equality agencies and women’s civil society.

What Are Women’s Interests?

Scholars employing the concept of women’s interests acknowledge women’s diversity, by defining them as those issues that emerge from the gender division of labour and hierarchies of status and influence that disadvantage women relative to men.²⁸ Understood that way, the policy issues associated with women’s substantive representation include reproductive rights, childcare, family law, sexual harassment and violence, and equal pay, among others.²⁹

The escalation of contests around gender associated with far-right forces complicates how parliaments advance women’s interests.³⁰ Gender is a central component of far-right politics which acts rhetorically as ‘symbolic glue’ to unite different right-wing groups in their opposition against equality,³¹ with implications for democratic erosion.³²

23 Freidenvall and Ramberg 2021; Lombardo and Mergaert 2013

24 Kantola and Lombardo 2021

25 Pereira and Mosquera 2025, p. 2

26 Pereira and Mosquera 2025, p. 4

27 Chaney 2013

28 Escobar-Lemmon and Taylor-Robinson 2014

29 Begum et al 2025

30 Karlberg et al 2025; Lombardo et al 2025

31 Korolczuk et al 2025

32 Mondon and Winter 2020

This is further complicated by the fact that many women share experiences of gender-based discrimination, reproduction, and raising children, different class positions, racial and ethnic, citizenship background etc. that may create diverging experiences and policy preferences on issues.³³ Substantive representation must be as such considered intersectionally, reflecting the multiple structures positioning those represented.

Studying the Substantive Representation of Women

Pitkin defines substantive representation as *acting* for others³⁴ — that is, how politicians articulate the interests of the represented in a way that is responsive to their needs and wishes.

Descriptive representation (the presence of a marginalised group in politics) is positively associated with substantive political representation, despite the ‘complex and contingent’ nature of this relationship.³⁵ While noting this relationship is not exempt from the effects of institutions and political culture,^{36 37} does not discount the fact that women parliamentarians are still more likely than men to work for women’s interests in parliament, as they share policy interests³⁸ and electorally benefit when doing so.³⁹

Given this analysis, advocates have argued not only for increasing the presence of women and racialised minorities at all levels of political office,⁴⁰ but also for the re-design of parliaments which have historically centred the needs of representatives who are white, non-disabled men (Hawkesworth 2003; Krook and Mackay 2010; Childs 2016; Smith 2021; Evans and Reher 2024) to enable representatives to work on equal terms.⁴¹

33 Existing research conceptualizes women’s issues as a broad policy category encompassing two main areas: (1) areas traditionally associated with women due to gender stereotypes, like education and healthcare and (2) matters directly related to advancing women’s rights, such as reproductive freedom, pay equity, and combating gender-based violence. Women’s interests, on the other hand, are defined primarily as ‘women’s access or protection within each of these policy areas’ (Celis et al. 2014, 163).

34 Pitkin 1967 p. 209

35 Allen and Childs 2018 p.619

36 O’Brien and Piscopo 2019

37 Identifying the relationship between gender of the politician and policy outcome cannot be a mechanical exercise especially in parliamentary systems characterised by strong party discipline.

38 Lovenduski and Norris 2003

39 Bailer et al 2022

40 Phillips 1998; Mansbridge 1999.

41 Making sense of the links between who sits in power and the kinds of policies they support and may deliver is often discussed in terms of inequalities in what has been termed descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representation (Rashkova and Erzeel, 2023, p 525). Descriptive representation refers to how the characteristics of a group are mirrored in the composition of a political party, committee, or assembly. In other words, the extent to which a representative assembly resembles those being represented. This form of representation raises questions such as: does the representative look like, have common interests with, or share certain experiences with the represented? Symbolic representation is concerned with the ways that a representative ‘stands for’ the represented – that is, the meaning a representative has for those being represented.

What Else Should We Consider About Women Leaders?

Even when women are present in significant numbers and parliaments are structured to include them, access to real decision-making power remains essential for advancing the interests of the most marginalised groups. For example, government ministers have a unique capacity to substantively represent marginalised groups through their control of policy priorities and legislative agendas.⁴² Yet, these senior roles within executives are few and the women who occupy them are often placed in less prestigious posts and ‘feminine’ briefs,⁴³ although this trend is moderated by party ideology.⁴⁴

Critical Actors, Acts, and Processes

Substantive representation is then best understood as a multifaceted phenomenon that includes acting ‘for’ women’s interests. Again, the type of activities that count as ‘acting for’ women can be quite diverse, including party pledges, parliamentary activity, government actions and collective action.⁴⁵ Following Rashkova and Erzeel substantive representation often depends on (critical) acts which foster women’s heterogeneous group interests.⁴⁶ In the literature on gender and political representation, ‘critical actors’ refer to the role and impact of highly committed agents who actively promote gender equality despite their numbers, these can include male allies.⁴⁷ There are also *cautions to keep in mind*: Siow (2023) details checks when assessing what constitutes substantive representation and how we evaluate it.⁴⁸ These ‘checks’ include avoiding a focus on speeches or policies that have framed women’s interests in ways that are *stereotypical or stigmatizing* and or that does not reflect an intersectional understanding of women’s lives.⁴⁹ These checks are helpful when using the content of speeches and debates in parliaments to look for a link between who raises an issue and any policies that come about, especially at a time where ‘concerns’ for women and girls can be instrumentalized in anti-immigration and or far right agendas.⁵⁰ All the facets of ‘good’ representation are rarely contributed by a single parliamentary speech, individual, or narrow group of legislators and following Siow it is argued that empirical studies of substantive representation should include a greater evaluation of the *collective work of institutions as a whole*.⁵¹

42 Atchison 2015

43 Curtin et al. 2023

44 Goddard 2021

45 Measurement approaches include representative claim analysis, self-reported preferences and activities based on surveys, committee membership, positions in committees, bill sponsorship, voting behaviour, or content analyses of parliamentary speeches, questions, and websites, laws passed, the size of public spending in certain sectors, or ideological congruence. While such indicators do not capture the meaning of substantive representation in a comprehensive manner, they are proxy variables.

46 Rashkova and Erzeel 2023

47 Childs & Krook 2009, p. 138

48 Siow 2023

49 Siow’s (2023) comprehensive analysis of Parliamentary speeches in the UK House of Commons finds that members of affected groups are most likely to represent the interests and associated issues of those groups in the least stigmatizing, stereotypical ways that include references to structural factors. In other words, how representatives constitute women’s and intersectional interests matters in evaluating the ‘quality’ of substantive representation.

50 She also acknowledges that the way political institutions work, and legislative agendas operate mean most politicians do not enjoy the opportunities to give complex views and assessments of policy issues.

51 Siow 2023

Following this, measures of substantive representation include not just what politicians say and do, but the *processes* they use to consult and incorporate women's views and organisations into policy making. This includes what groups politicians invite into parliaments to give testimony and evidence. Engagement between political representatives and *civil society and other experts* on gender and equality issues has been found to be most likely to happen when the politician belongs to a marginalised group or has a track record of raising the interests of such groups.⁵²

These engagements play an important role in *constitutive representation*: in how they contribute to 'construct portrayals or depictions'⁵³ of the group they may share characteristics and lived experiences with.⁵⁴ This matters because the ability to access parliamentary processes including committees and other venues where decision makers listen to and debate on policy issues can depend on who has been established as credible and legible. How women leaders behave in politics then matters, in the sense of who they engage with outside of parliaments and how they might either invite groups into committees to give evidence and or draw from these groups in their own representative work including speeches.⁵⁵

When we view what matters for delivering policy for women's interests, we include then an acknowledgement of *critical actors and organisations outside of Parliamentary politics*. This includes in the Irish case, the role of feminist and allied civil society that have introduced new frameworks, mobilised their members in innovative campaigns and substantive policy submissions to the political system in shifting the dial on legislative breakthroughs on issues including divorce, reproductive health, Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (DSGBV), supports for lone parents, carers and reforms to taxation and social protection.⁵⁶ This said, austerity related public funding cuts and shifts in the 'governance' of civil society towards a surveillant and managerialist mode have weakened the capacity of the sector to deliver research and advocacy.⁵⁷ This has been further threatened by democratic erosion in the form of the emergence and consolidation of far-right interests in Irish society.⁵⁸

Civil society remains a key space where women leaders predominate, and intersectional analyses thrive — often highlighting the lived experience of poor policy implementation. Other contextual developments have supported women leaders in civil society and in the Oireachtas to advance change. These include parliamentary reforms enacted after the economic crises that strengthened parliamentary power capacitating opposition parties to influence the legislative agenda through Private Members' Bills and improved resourcing of parliamentary committees.⁵⁹

52 Christofferson et al 2025

53 Saward 2006, p. 414

54 Christoffersen et al 2025, pp. 1-5

55 Christoffersen et al 2025 pp. 1-4

56 Murphy and O' Connor 2021

57 Visser 2018

58 Cohen et al 2024

59 Reidy and Buckley 2017



Methodological Approach

Methodological Approach: Where, Who and What?

Two dimensions: interest articulation and responsiveness/accountability have been used to produce indexes that measure different elements of substantive representation.^{60 61} These include:

- **Parliamentary activity:** the extent to which parties and their members mention women's interests or actions for achieving women's substantive representation in parliamentary documents, in particular *bill proposals and parliamentary questions*.
- **Policy responsiveness:** the extent to which women's preferences are reflected in *policy outcomes*.
- **Accountability:** the extent to which parliaments and governments take action to inform, exchange views with, and consult with women's organizations and societal actors in policymaking.⁶²

Avoiding self-reported measures, the analysis used in this report draws on qualitative content analysis of specific parliamentary contexts, processes, and *policy objects to map examples of substantive representative of women's interests*.

Given the scope of this report, the approach taken is partial and indicative rather than comprehensive, aiming to identify *two policy areas* where there is evidence of delivery on women's interests. This analysis asks: *Where did substantive representation take place? Who substantively represented women's interests? How did this occur and what form did it take?*

The two cases selected are outlined and discussed below:

Drilling down into two specific examples of political deliberation and policy making on gender justice enables a reflection on how women's leadership, in terms of access and influence intersected to *amplify and or accelerate* and actualize policy that delivers for women. This approach is qualitative and descriptive and includes identifying *turning points* in legislative processes where presence translated into acts that shifted the dial to deliver an outcome reflecting broader societal and feminist aims.

In this account, we do not 'follow' specific women leaders yet rather identify the ecosystem required and conditions that seems important for constitutive representation of women in their diversity. This includes the presence of women leaders inside and outside of parliaments, in other words their embodied presence, their access to and position within systems and processes where such deliberation, debate and influence can be exercised. This incorporates identifying the established *hall marks of how women lead* in these cases – in their use of experiential evidence, extra parliamentary testimony, and in particular legal expertise. Fundamentally this is about understanding how and when women leaders acquire the capacity to set agendas, frame narratives, collaborate and network so they can and do deliver substantive representation for women.

60 Rashkova and Erzeel 2023

61 These authors are clear that no set of indicators can fully capture the complexity of women's substantive representation.

62 Rashkova and Erzeel 2023

Data used here include Oireachtas debates, Committee hearings (including witness testimony), Oireachtas Library Service materials, legislative records, media reports, and contextualising accounts from extra parliamentary actors involved in the specific policy areas. These are analysed through the theoretical lens outlined above — focusing on how women politicians contribute to progressive policy that advances gender justice.





Case Studies

Case Studies

Two policy areas were selected that clearly demonstrate the advancement of women's interests:

1. **Reproductive Health and Rights – Repeal of the Eighth Amendment**
2. **Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (DSGBV) – Ratification of the Istanbul Convention and establishment of Cuan (the DSGBV agency)**

Both policy issues represent complex social and political trajectories where inertia at best has slowed progress, yet they demonstrate women's interests being advanced in substantive ways through progressive policy development.

In *case one*, seventeen debates of the Joint Committee on the Eight Amendment of the Constitution⁶³ were assessed thematically as well as ancillary commentary and analysis. This included reading of the text generated and visual assessment of the recorded debates.

In *case two*, a process tracing approach was used to map the key developments in the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the establishment of Cuan. Process tracing is a research method used to identify actors, understand how a particular set of policy decisions unfolds over time, and explain the causes of policy decisions. A selected review of 492 debate references to the Istanbul Convention was undertaken using the Oireachtas "Find a Debate" search function, focusing on pivotal debates in:

- 2018 (Domestic Violence Bill)
- 2019 (Ratification)
- 2023 (Pre-legislative scrutiny of the Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency Bill)

Analysis of Joint Committee debates in both cases offered advantages in capturing inputs from both Dáil and Seanad and the inclusion of expert and witness testimonies.

⁶³ See [here](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/?debateType=committee&datePeriod=all&fromDate=21%2F01%2F1919&toDate=17%2F09%2F2025&term=%2Fie%2Foireachtas%2Fhouse%2Fdail%2F34&committee=%2Fen%2Fcommittees%2F32%2F eighth-amendment-constitution%2F&member) for list of all debates. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/?debateType=committee&datePeriod=all&fromDate=21%2F01%2F1919&toDate=17%2F09%2F2025&term=%2Fie%2Foireachtas%2Fhouse%2Fdail%2F34&committee=%2Fen%2Fcommittees%2F32%2F eighth-amendment-constitution%2F&member>

Case 1 – Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution

Women Leaders: Amplification

In this case study, women leaders can be characterised as working to *amplify* decades long civil society activism to secure the successful 2018 referendum to repeal the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution Act 1983 that had largely prohibited access to abortion. The focus here is on the conditions that made women's leadership matter (see Table 1) and the indicators of substantive representation — specifically, interest articulation and responsiveness.

Context

This case study does not suggest a singular event or set of people delivered repeal.⁶⁴ Rather the work of the Committee discussed below reflects one element of a complex tapestry of activist, legal, societal and parliamentary engagements that make up the context for abortion law reform in Ireland.

This context included the long-standing existence of feminist activists and the establishment new campaign groups, alongside challenges to the existing law in Ireland and at the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The pro-choice movement, and their decades long agitation, supported predominantly by left-wing parties in parliament led first to government agreement in 2016 to establishing a Citizens' Assembly (CA) to make recommendations to the Oireachtas on further constitutional changes, including the Eighth Amendment. A parliamentary committee followed this to review the CA's report.

Justice Laffoy chaired the CA, and ninety-nine members were randomly selected from the citizens of Ireland. Five meetings of the CA, held from January to April 2017 and totalling more than 90 hours, focused on abortion. Finally, the government gave a commitment to hold a further referendum to liberalize abortion provision in Ireland.⁶⁵ While analysis suggests that the wording of the 2018 abortion referendum had a complex path to the ballot paper, essentially only two options were given serious consideration once a decision to hold a referendum had been taken.⁶⁶

Much has been written on this momentous referendum especially on the campaign with a consensus forming of a confluence of factors delivering the outcome.⁶⁷ Some of these analyses underlined broader societal and cultural shifts, others were clear that civil society action through a carefully orchestrated campaign delivered the outcome. Women's leadership was highlighted as crucial especially in shifting the terms of the debate, introducing complexity in the issues discussed moving past absolutist elements of previous political debates. While strategic choices were evident, a range of women's interests featured that included medical care for women, mental health, and the role of new medical technologies such as in vitro fertilization.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Calkin et al 2020; Griffin et al 2019; de Londras and Enright 2018; Quilty and Kennedy 2016 and others

⁶⁵ Field 2018; Reidy 2020

⁶⁶ Reidy 2020

⁶⁷ E.g., Cullen 2020; Fitzsimons and Kennedy 2023; Griffin et al 2019; de Londras and Enright 2018; Enright et al 2020. O Shaughnessy 2024a; 2024b; O Shaughnessy et al 2025

⁶⁸ Griffin et al 2019; Reidy 2020

Pathway Towards the Referendum

The 17 sessions of the Joint Committee on the Eight Amendment of the Constitution comprise the evidential base.⁶⁹ This special committee, of TDs and Senators, were tasked with considering the CA's report and reporting conclusions and recommendations to the Dáil and the Seanad within three months of their first public meeting.

The 22-person committee included thirteen women and the female chair, which provided a critical mass of women decision-makers. This was significant given how women are in a minority in parties – and this context gave them an anchor to *reframe debates, collaborate, and network*.

Positional, Active, and Transformative Power

A female senator from the ruling centre right party, Fine Gael, was appointed Committee chairperson. This was significant in that women leaders require positional power (to be present in sufficient numbers and in influential roles) and active power (have resources and remit to make changes) to enact transformational power.⁷⁰

Positional and active power is essential especially in contexts where women leaders face resistance, this was a particular dimension of the Committees' dynamic.⁷¹ While the Committee was considered to have a majority in favour of liberalising the State's strict abortion laws⁷² other independent members held strong anti-choice views. Both centre right parties Fianna Fail and Fianna Gael predominated in the Committee – members were allowed to vote with their conscience. This added to uncertainty as divisions remained across parties and expectations were that a limited recommendation would ensue.⁷³

The Committee chair faced significant resistance and challenge inside and outside of the chamber. Her role in enabling testimony to be delivered, modulating the tone of debate, and time keeping placed her in the frontline. The presence of women leaders in a critical mass and their conduct and tone offered tangible embodied support and protection to the chair. Their physical presence also symbolised their experiential knowledge of the issues at stake and shared interests in the outcome. Their substantive inputs remained constructive, detail oriented and illustrated deep engagement with the technical dimensions of the CA report.

This representational work demanded that deliberation be driven by facts and precision that located the debate in legal terms contrasting against normative speculation. In some ways women Committee members acted as a *cordon sanitaire* for both the chair, other members, and expert witnesses, to insulate the process from misdirection and delegitimization.

69 See [here](https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/?debateType=committee&datePeriod=all&fromDate=21%2F01%2F1919&toDate=17%2F09%2F2025&term=%2Fie%2Foireachtas%2Fhouse%2Fdail%2F34&committee=%2Fen%2Fcommittees%2F32%2F Eighth-amendment-constitution%2F&member) for list of all debates. <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/find/?debateType=committee&datePeriod=all&fromDate=21%2F01%2F1919&toDate=17%2F09%2F2025&term=%2Fie%2Foireachtas%2Fhouse%2Fdail%2F34&committee=%2Fen%2Fcommittees%2F32%2F Eighth-amendment-constitution%2F&member>

70 Celis and Lovenduski 2018

71 Active, transformative power is also required to define to advocate for women's issues and interests, to form alliances and raise numerical support for these issues, to engage in persuading opponents during political discussion and deliberation, and to settle the debate between competing women's interests (Childs and Krook, 2008; Celis et al 2018, p. 157).

72 Griffin et al 2019, p. 79

73 Griffin et al 2019

Interest Articulation: Talking About Women's Interests

A key measure of substantive representation for women is how women leaders 'talk about' women's interests.⁷⁴ This is in itself an act of 'constitutive representation,' which involves questioning which women are included and which aspects of identity and related issues are raised.

Analysis suggests that many politicians, even those who supported removing the eight amendment had engaged quietly, sporadically or in ways that often did not centre the right to choose, reproductive agency, reproductive justice, and the moral standing of pregnant people as ethical decision-makers when it came to their pregnancies.⁷⁵ However, in contrast, assessment of the Joint Committee revealed women in leadership positions did challenge "foetocentric and punitive, exceptionalising abortion and conceptualising law as a means of discouraging abortion".⁷⁶ In this way women leaders participating in the Committee demonstrated expansive interest articulation and responsiveness to a diversity of issues relevant to women.

While intersectional dimensions of reproductive justice were underexamined in most parliamentary contexts including this Committee, female members did challenge pronatalist ideas and unfounded and emotive claims around abortion care. Indeed, while the outcome of the Committee fell short of some of the CA recommendations it was more ambitious than the proposal that emanated from the cabinet and indicates the power of women's leadership to maintain core elements of gender justice – leading critical feminist legal scholars to declare "The reality, though, was that the General Scheme included limitations that could not be traced back to either the Citizens' Assembly recommendations or the Joint Oireachtas Committee report."⁷⁷

In this way women politicians on the Committee demonstrated aspects of good democratic substantive representation that include a responsiveness to and the inclusion of, issues and interests of many groups of women.⁷⁸ Seven of the twelve women Committee members played an outsized role in prefiguring a pro-choice position, which in turn may have emboldened more reticent politicians in their own and other parties.⁷⁹ This included women leaders from extra parliamentary contexts that provided testimony to the Committee in careful and considered ways that deepened and exalted the quality of discourse and debate. This was despite efforts to challenge their testimony and notably the integrity and credibility of the associated Citizens' Assembly.⁸⁰ Efforts made to use emotive language and contribute misinformation⁸¹ were countered by women member witnesses and through questioning and reframing by women Committee members.

74 Siow 2023

75 De Londras 2020, p. 34

76 De Londras 2020 p. 38

77 Carolan and Glennon 2021 p. 198

78 Celis et al 2018 p. 150

79 Crucial testimony included the former chair of the CA Justice Laffoy on the widespread use of abortion pills procured online by Irish women (p. 81) Male consultants in OBGYN offered testimony, in particular Rhona Mahony (master of the National Maternity Hospital in Holles Street) underlined the risks to women of relying on such methods. Griffin et al (2019, p. 82) underline how there was significant public interest in live streaming the committee and in social media related content with feminist civil society organisations and other pro-choice groups live tweeting many of the meetings – further amplifying women's leadership on the committee.

80 Meeting 1 September 20th, 2017, p. 25

81 Meeting record 27th September 2017 p. 30

While the tone and content of the debates were often heated, assessments suggest that the clarity of expert evidence facilitated constructive deliberation.⁸² Importantly, the presence of women leaders surfacing, articulating, and amplifying women's interests scaffolded this expert testimony, ensuring it was engaged with substantively. In one example during Meeting 2, legal experts provided testimony that was challenged; women leaders drew on what de Londras⁸³ and Enright describe as 'feminist law work' – how non-lawyer feminist activists engage with legal processes, institutions, and argumentation to secure abortion access for pregnant people.⁸⁴ By bringing discussions back to core legal issues, clarifying constitutional elements of proposed options, and interrogating technical details, women leaders guided deliberations toward a comprehensive, evidence-based assessment of the CA recommendations.

The Committee's role, imperfect as the outcome may have been, was significant in setting the terms for repeal, particularly in relation to the CA.⁸⁵ Women's leadership demonstrated responsiveness and interest articulation, safeguarding core elements of the CA recommendations and highlighting the lack of evidential basis for minority views. Subsequent Dáil and Seanad debates further featured female politicians offering personal testimony and communicating the gendered effects of maintaining the ban, creating opportunities for male allyship even among previously silent pro-choice politicians.⁸⁶

While other parliamentary and extra-parliamentary actors, both women and men, also contributed through protests and symbolic actions,⁸⁷ significant gaps in abortion care remain.⁸⁸ This case exemplifies how long-fought civil society campaigns were amplified and translated into political capital by a critical mass of women parliamentarians, who actively countered attempts to undermine the CA process and Committee's credibility, reflecting patterns identified in other parliamentary contexts.⁸⁹

While there are cases where the Oireachtas Committee system has not leveraged the same changes – and CA recommendations have most recently found less traction despite female critical leadership in an associated Oireachtas Committee – this case study exemplifies how long fought civil society campaigns – were amplified and translated into political capital by a critical mass of women parliamentarians. These representative actors are especially significant given the contested nature of abortion that included efforts outside of the Committee to undermine the CA process and recommendations and latterly the credibility of the Committee itself.⁹⁰

82 Griffin et al., 2019, p.83

83 De Londras 2020

84 Enright et al 2021

85 Carolan & Glennon, 2024, p.198

86 Griffin et al., 2019, pp.83–84

87 NicGhabhann, 2018 ; Enright, 2020 ; Fitzsimons, 2021 ; Kennedy, 2021 ; O'Shaughnessy, 2024

88 O'Shaughnessy, 2022 ; Enright, 2023 ; NWC, 2025

89 Kantola and Lombardo, 2024

90 <https://www.thejournal.ie/mcgrath-mullen-abortion-committee-3643300-Oct2017/>

Feminist Representative Work in Parliaments Under Pressure:

This case aligns with aspects feminist institutional acts. These are understood as concerted efforts in political and parliamentary contexts to advance gender equality often in contexts indifferent or resistant to that goal.⁹¹ Notably, responses do not necessarily come from self-defined feminist actors and may come from various political ideologies.⁹²

Strategies identified include:

1. **Knowledge-based responses:** developing a progressive discourse, supported by scientific/expert reports, comprehensive data, and activist demands. This includes adherence to the rules of procedure, to allow experts and the chair to articulate the aims of the Committee.⁹³ In the face of efforts to undermine witness testimony this form of leadership demobilised such provocations aimed at polarising the debate.⁹⁴
2. **Formal and informal alliances** feminist parliamentarians and civil society organizations and activists build cross- and intergroup party-political alliances (including with moderate conservatives) to foster support for equality positions even among actors who have not defended them publicly before.⁹⁵ The aim is to debunk efforts to delegitimise democratic processes and feminist knowledge.^{96 97} Such alliances emerge in solidarity against attacks on gendered targets and are evident in how women parliamentarians enacted and embodied the credibility and democratic legitimacy of the Committee.

91 Caravantes and Lombardo 2024, p. 150

92 Kantola and Lombardo, 2024

93 Lombardo et al 2025, p.5

94 Griffin et al 2019

95 Krizsán and Roggeband, 2021

96 Lombardo et al 2025, p. 18

97 Coalitions can also be developed within parliamentary committees, but they are not without effort where pro-equality actors must persuade members from less gender-aware political factions to join, especially if agreements concern morality issues (Kantola, 2022).

Case 1 – Women Leaders: Amplification

Who	Where	What
– Women chair (positional / active power) – Critical mass women politicians cross party – Male political allies – Extra parliamentary actors – Feminist civil society – Allied experts (medical and legal)	– Extra-Parliamentary Deliberation – Citizens’ Assembly – Joint Committee of Parliament	– Knowledge – Experiential and technical/factual testimony – Careful Deliberation – Contest of illiberal discourse
How	Outcome	
– Coalition: Collaboration/ cordon sanitaire – Rule making: Tone setting – Embodied and affective solidarity – Feminist law work	– Substantive Representation – Amplification of extra parliamentary activism/ analysis and societal sentiment – Reframing of debate – Sanction for Referendum	

Case 2 – Ratification of the Istanbul Convention and establishment of Cuan

Women Leaders: Acceleration

Context

The 2022 Central Statistics Office (CSO) survey on Sexual Violence against women and men in Ireland found 40% of adults surveyed had experienced sexual violence at some point in the lifetime, and prevalence was higher for women (52%) than men (28%). A total of 39% of women and 12% of men had experienced sexual violence as an adult (18+ years of age), while 36% of women and 22% of men had experienced sexual violence as a child.⁹⁸ Twenty-three percent (23%) of women had experienced sexual violence as both an adult and a child, compared to 6% of men.⁹⁹ Despite its pervasive nature, policy development on DSGBV in Ireland has been uneven, under resourced and lacking coordination.¹⁰⁰

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women, or Istanbul Convention, was adopted by the Council of Europe Committee of Ministers on 7 April 2011. Known as The Istanbul Convention (IC) it defines gender-based violence in relation to gender equality and proposes coordinated intervention from a large number of actors, state, and non-state, to acknowledge, combat, and prevent violence at individual and structural levels. Gender-based violence is one of the most widely and successfully regulated gender policy fields, marked by the adoption of (inter)national legislation.¹⁰¹

Ireland signed up to the convention in 2015. The Government agreed at the time of the signing of the IC to an action plan that contained outstanding legislative and administrative actions identified as necessary to enable Ireland's ratification of the convention.¹⁰² Those actions were incorporated into the second national strategy on domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, which was published in January 2016. Ireland finally ratified the Istanbul Convention on March 8, 2019, by completing legislative and administrative reforms, including key acts like the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017, the Criminal Justice (Sexual Offences) Act 2017, Domestic Violence Act 2018 Criminal Law (Extraterritorial Jurisdiction) Act 2019, Family Courts Act 2024.¹⁰³

98 Kelly et al 2025

99 OLS 2023

100 For an overview of the development of policy and law in this area see [Department of Justice, Home Affairs and Migration](#) (2021) Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence: An Audit of Structures

101 Krizsan et al 2025, p. 2162

102 The Convention emphasises the importance of data and it requires robust mechanisms to collect and analyse information on DSGBV to understand the issue in its various forms, and the impact on it of policy and service interventions and other measures. A specially convened independent expert group, Grevio, was established to monitor compliance with the provisions of the Convention by member States, which is done through annual reviews and period evaluations. In Ireland, the Irish Human Rights and Equality commission also provides independent reports to Grevio.

103 Key legislative developments may include: Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence 2019 ;Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017;Domestic Violence Act 2018;Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Bill (known as Coco's Law) 2021 Other policy areas including National Strategies are detailed in: Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2021, L&RS Spotlight: Addressing Gender-Based Violence. Part Two: Interventions. No. 5 of 2021.

Ireland is now in the middle of implementing its third national strategy to address domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV). Known as ‘Zero Tolerance,’ and covering the period 2022 to 2026, this strategy is composed of four pillars: (i) prevention, (ii) protection, (iii) prosecution, and (iv) policy co-ordination. A key component of the ‘Zero Tolerance’ strategy was the establishment of a new statutory DSGBV agency. This agency, known as Cuan, commenced its operations in January 2024 and is tasked with tackling and reducing DSGBV.¹⁰⁴ These later developments are notable in including aspects of codesign that included civil society and service provider organisations and an apparatus for implementation, elements largely missing from prior policy development on women’s issues. Cuan also represents a break from siloed approaches where DSGBV policies and services were spread across government with no overall responsible ministry. While aspects such as housing remain outside its purview it does represent innovation in politics and policy on women’s interests, particularly in a context where equality and gender justice have been de-emphasised in governmental terms.¹⁰⁵

The path towards ratification (which took almost 5 years) and subsequent associated policy developments including the establishment of Cuan represents a case where evidence exists on three dimensions of substantive representation:

- **Parliamentary activity:** Bill proposals, debates, and parliamentary questions
- **Policy responsiveness:** policy outcomes
- **Accountability:** inform, exchange views, and consult with women’s organizations and women societal actors

This case also affords an opportunity to assess the importance of women in ministerial roles and the incremental work of women in politics allied with civil society across the policy cycle to maintain an impetus and draw attention to an issue previously ‘hidden’ from view and or narrowly defined in criminal justice and social policy terms.

Despite these developments it is important to underline analysis in the context of the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) which has highlighted the gaps that remain for victims and survivors.¹⁰⁶ There are also documented gaps between what the Oireachtas Joint Committee that considered the terms and procedures for Cuan had recommended and the final version of the Bill enacted. These included asks around the independence of the agency, the constitution of its board, intersectional considerations in its remit and its statutory powers.¹⁰⁷ In this sense this case also illustrates how despite feminist leadership in multiple domains and coalitional work with a range of actors, obstacles remain in political, policy and legislative terms to elaborating strong, independent and adequately resourced protections and programmes.

104 IHREC note concerns with Cuan that include the strength of its mandate and its independence, specifically its location of the agency under the Department of Justice and the lack of a policy function which may compromise its ability to independently monitor implementation and critically evaluate the State’s performance. They also raised concerns about the short time frame that the Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence Agency Bill 2023 was debated in the Dáil and the lack of time for scrutiny of the proposals (IHREC 2025, p. 84).

105 These insights are taken from discussion with actors involved in co-design of DSGBV approaches which included input into the development of Cuan.

106 IHREC 2025, p. 83

107 Oireachtas Library Service 2023

Women Leaders as Normpreneurs: Ratification of the Istanbul Convention

IC ratification processes have been analysed in many countries to understand gender equality progress and its bottlenecks.¹⁰⁸ In these assessments of efforts to adopt and ratify the IC it is found that mobilization of gender equality advocates, both within and outside of the state play a critical role as do women's parliamentary representation. However, ratification of the IC has been highly contested and even when ratified it may be under resourced and or partially elaborated in ways that undermine its intent and scope. This said, thematic analysis of Parliamentary debates between 2014 and 2019 that mention the IC, indicate concerted efforts by female politicians in both houses of the Oireachtas to maintain pressure on government to ratify the treaty. Core articles of the IC have been used by women leaders to argue for the establishment of Cuan (article 10).¹⁰⁹

A review of debates¹¹⁰ reveals how intransigence about ratification of the IC was framed in terms of its constitutional implications. These often revolved around argumentation that "Article 52 on emergency barring orders presents a particular difficulty in relation to property rights under the Irish constitution."¹¹¹ Ratification was important in advancing legislation and policy and included that the Convention would open Ireland up to International monitoring. Analysis of resistance to the IC in the European Parliament¹¹² underlines how parliamentarians can act either as norm promoters or normpreneurs or norm antipreneurs by framing their support for or in opposition to ratification.^{113 114} For antipreneurs, the norms associated with ratification of the IC challenges the status quo in unacceptable ways. In contrast norm promoters use parliamentary and extra parliamentary processes to support IC ratification as part of broader *gender equality norm diffusion*. This effort to promote such norms using international law can lead to transformation but is often met with contestation. This contest by norm antipreneurs includes questioning the norm's embedded in the IC in terms of their validity and credibility. While Berthet¹¹⁵ analysed struggles around the IC in the European Parliament and how issues of sovereignty were used to resist it, in the Irish context, other dimensions of sovereignty linked to property ownership have figured in such contests.¹¹⁶

108 Krisan and Roggeband 2021

109 Justice Committee PLS 2023

110 See here for list of all debates:<https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/search/?q=Istanbul+Convention+ratification+&searchType=debates&debateType=all&datePeriod=all>

111 International Agreements – Tuesday, 30 Apr 2013 – Parliamentary Questions (31st Dáil) – Houses of the Oireachtas <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/question/2013-04-30/445/#pq-answers-445>

112 Berthet 2022

113 Berthet 2022, p. 678

114 Initially perceived by supporters in the European Parliament as a milestone for the advancement of women's rights and gender equality, the Convention soon became a norm "under fire" as the target of vehement anti-gender contestations.

115 Berthet 2022

116 Crowley 2019, p.226

Crowley is clear on this issue in stating:

“From the outset, Ireland purported to support in principle the aims of the Istanbul Convention, but was demonstrably reluctant given the perceived need, once again, to protect the competing property rights of persons accused of domestic offences. In particular, the State was required to satisfy itself that the ratification and implementation of the Convention requirements in respect of the availability of emergency barring orders under Article 52 would not interfere with the property rights of accused persons as protected by the Irish Constitution.”¹¹⁷

Women politicians¹¹⁸ in particular those with constitutional legal expertise were instrumental in challenging the stance that ratification required constitutional reform.¹¹⁹ Such contests are evident in Oireachtas debates concerning the passing of the Domestic Violence Bill (2017).¹²⁰ Feminist legal scholars confirm that work on the Bill in the Joint Committee was essential to broadening the availability of an emergency barring order “based on the nature and immediacy of the threat, as opposed to the property status of the parties. This was provided for in section 9 of the Domestic Violence Act 2018. These guidelines did not feature in the original Domestic Violence Bill 2017 (as originally introduced before the Seanad) but were added as a recommendation at Committee Stage”.¹²¹ This said the Domestic Violence Act 2018, a central component of the Government’s preparation for ratification, left many issues unresolved including how victims had to resort to both civil and criminal systems for protection..¹²²

Another key parliamentary Committee (Joint Committee on Justice Report on Pre-Legislative Scrutiny of the General Scheme of the Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence Agency Bill May 2023) was populated by two women and twelve men. Debates on this Committee that included input from women politicians, male allies, and expert and witness testimony concerned the terms of reference establishing Cuan. A review of the content of these debates indicates how parliamentarians and the witnesses they invited enacted interest articulation of women’s interests that reflected the lived reality of sexual and gender-based violence.

Committees are crucial contexts where experiential and feminist expert *knowledge* can *accelerate* change seeded in other societal and extra-parliamentary arenas. Reflecting dynamics in case 1 this is achieved in part by how expertise and experiential knowledge is amplified by the representational authority and actions of women leaders and sympathetic male colleagues. Who gets invited and how their testimony is received and debated are in turn, key elements of accountability a core measure of substantive representation of women’s interests.¹²³ In this way such representative acts accelerate the momentum established by longstanding representative work by women parliamentarians and testimony of DSGBV civil society and on occasion victims and survivors to deliver

117 Crowley 2019, p. 233-251 in Black and Dunne (2019)

118 Feminist law work by Ivana Bacik and others was crucial.

119 Argumentation around property rights still hold power in debates around the protection of victims and survivors.

120 Oireachtas 2018

121 Crowley 2019, p. 2331-251 Black and Dunne 2019; see also L. Crowley, ‘Domestic violence law’ in L. Black and P. Dunne (eds), *Law, and Gender in Modern Ireland: Critique and Reform* (Hart Publishing, 2019) 137, 146.

122 Leahy 2023

123 Rashkova and Erzeel 2023; Christoffersen et al 2025

legislative reform.¹²⁴ These representational acts accelerated strong impetus within extra parliamentary contexts for change around sexual violence by using political platforms and voice to maintain visibility of the issue and pressure on the state to ratify the IC¹²⁵ and establish Cuan.¹²⁶

Women Ministers: Positional and Active Power

While a male minister presided over ratification of the IC. Two female ministers were pivotal.¹²⁷ The first in seeding its ratification (in the context of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and gender-based Violence 2016 - 2021 and Action Plan)¹²⁸ and the second in elaborating on its legislative and policy mandates in Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence 2022-2026.¹²⁹ This included in the most recent representative work the establishment of Cuan¹³⁰ and the Dublin Declaration by the Council of Europe.¹³¹

Government ministers have a unique capacity to substantively represent marginalised groups through their control of policy priorities and legislative agendas.¹³² Although, women politicians have historically been either left out of ministerial posts or assigned to 'softer' portfolios or more junior ministerial roles, with less power and resources.^{133 134} In 2025 Ireland had merely three women appointed to senior ministries and has never exceeded four women in cabinet at any one time. Liu and Banaszak¹³⁵ argue that female ministries' matter in their high visibility and greater ability to influence policy. Analysis of parliamentary debates and process tracing of policy development on DSGBV indicate that

¹²⁴ The commencement of the landmark Domestic Violence Act 2018 on 1 January 2019, which, among other things, introduced the offence of coercive control. Putting the offence of coercive control on a statutory footing was a crucial step in recognising the effect of non-violent control in an intimate relationship. The enactment of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 which introduced a statutory definition of consent to a sexual act. The enactment of the Criminal Justice (Victims of Crime) Act 2017 which provides a wide range of measures to protect and inform victims during the progress of their case through the Criminal Justice system.

The carrying out of a two major national awareness raising campaigns to change societal behaviours in relation to domestic and sexual violence. The 'What Would You Do?' campaign to raise awareness of domestic violence ran from 2016 -2019 and 'No Excuses' campaign to raise awareness of sexual harassment and sexual violence that ran from 2019 till the end of 2021.

The establishment of Divisional Protective Service Units in all policing divisions nationwide.

The creation of measures aimed at combatting sexual violence and harassment in higher education institutions.

¹²⁵ For examples: [Joint Committee on Justice, Defence and Equality debate - Wednesday, 19 Feb 2014](#) and [International Agreements – Tuesday, 30 Apr 2013 – Parliamentary Questions \(31st Dáil\) – Houses of the Oireachtas](#)

¹²⁶ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/bills/bill/2023/54/?tab=debates>

¹²⁷ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/2018-05-02/15/>

¹²⁸ On 20 January 2016 Frances Fitzgerald T.D., the then Minister for Justice and Equality, launched the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and gender-based Violence 2016 - 2021 and Action Plan which was agreed by the Government on the 13 January 2016. Many of the measures supported Ireland's ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

¹²⁹ <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/seanad/2018-05-02/15/>

¹³⁰ <https://www.gov.ie/en/department-of-justice-home-affairs-and-migration/press-releases/minister-for-justice-helen-mcentee-leads-irelands-delegation-at-the-un-commission-on-the-status-of-women-in-new-york/>

¹³¹ On 30 September 2022, at a conference hosted by the Minister for Justice Helen McEntee TD, entitled "No safe haven: Integrated prevention measures to end domestic, sexual and gender-based violence", Ministers of the Council of Europe made a declaration on the prevention of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (the Dublin Declaration) seeking to underline their commitment to adopting measures and strategies aimed at preventing and combatting DSGBV.

¹³² Atchison 2015

¹³³ Connolly 2013

¹³⁴ As of 2025, twenty-three women have served as cabinet ministers in governments of the Republic of Ireland and its predecessors the Irish Free State (1922–1937) and the Irish Republic (1919–1922)

¹³⁵ Liu and Banaszak 2017

both ministers of Justice –¹³⁶ provided significant stewardship regarding both ratification of the IC and the establishment of Cuan. Ministerial disposition towards women’s interests are key elements in activating policy change. There is also evidence that female ministers have a more consultative style than male ministers.¹³⁷ Review of the list of witnesses across the two committees discussed above indicate a strong record of consulting and inviting DSGBV civil society and survivors into Parliamentary processes and spaces. Even so, ministerial leadership cannot on its own advance comprehensive policy development and relies on networks of female critical actors in civil service and in DSGBV and the justice system. Assessment by those centrally involved in delivering change in this sector underline how collaboration between senior women in criminal justice including the first female police commissioner in Ireland and women leaders in the civil service leveraged support for ministerial leadership on establishing Cuan and associated legislative and policy changes.¹³⁸

These women leaders acted then as *normpreneurs* – setting in train a trajectory where gender equality norms drive elements of policy change. This is not to suggest that policy in this area is as noted above now comprehensive, adequately resourced, and intersectional in all elements. Yet observers and actors close to the origins of Cuan in particular note it as a ‘break’ from past practice, illustrating policy imagination as one stated “Cuan goes against the tide in a way – it is different not just about service delivery but also there is capacity to look at new ways of doing things. It is about placing the issue in a central context and trying to tackle it structurally.”

In the Spanish context, Tania Verge’s prolific work as minister for feminisms and equality and her scholarship on Catalonia’s bold and inclusive model of feminist policy making is instructive for this Irish case.¹³⁹ The Catalanian case demonstrates the importance of feminist expertise and leadership across different venues in driving impactful change.¹⁴⁰ A core element of this was the establishment of the Ministry of Equality and Feminisms, reflecting the mobilisation strength of the women’s movement in previous years. Many of its officeholders, were feminist social activists and academics but driven by Verge’s leadership in the role. In her own analyses her ministerial positional power translated into active and transformative change through strategies highlighted above.

However, as the Catalanian case shows, it is state gender equality machinery and an active women’s movement that enabled ministerial power to enact ‘feminist principles such as promoting norms of gender equality, applying a gender lens

136 Frances Fitzgerald and Helen McEntee

137 Boswell et al. 2022

138 Key actors in the field provided contextualising information in written and verbal inputs to the research.

139 Verge 2022; Verge 2025

140 Verge identifies how progressive women leaders can deliver transformations: 1. Transforming knowledge: Knowledge has a prominent role in Barcelona’s gender equality policy, both in terms of the articulation of the discourse of a ‘feminist city’, and as a tool for gender-informed diagnosis and policy solutions. 2. Transforming policymaking and public funding: The municipality of Barcelona democratises policymaking regarding inclusion and participation through mainstreaming gender and its intersections – mostly focusing on class – across its policies as well as using gender-related criteria to assign and distribute public funding. 3. Transforming institutions: Intra-institutional change involves the strengthening of gender equality structures and tools like gender impact assessment reports. 4. Transforming actors’ coalitions: An effort is made to expand the municipality’s relations with civil society and to increase the participation of feminist organisations in policymaking processes.

to policies and consulting with diverse communities of women'.¹⁴¹ In the case of DSGBV such ministerial acts of *interest articulation and responsiveness to women's interests* must then be understood in the context of longer-term work of women leaders in civil society, the public testimony of survivors and how women in parliament used symbolic representation acts and feminist 'law work' to secure legislative progress.

Women leaders: Symbolic Representation and Experiential Proximity

Societal reaction and civil society response to a highly publicised rape trial and subsequently the murder of Ashling Murphy elicited symbolic testimonial and representative acts by female politicians in parliament.¹⁴² In this instance *rule breaking* by a female politician¹⁴³ (in using a prop in the Parliament in the form of women's underwear) was aimed at challenging 'victim blaming' in sexual assault cases.¹⁴⁴ This symbolic act illustrates the power of a female politician possessing experiential proximity¹⁴⁵ to highlight the stigmatisation and rape mythology characterising criminal justice responses to DSGBV. This symbolic act and the speech making that accompanied it, underlines how women parliamentarians have drawn on creative rule breaking to question the norms of representative activity and "challenge the dominant modes of power."¹⁴⁶

In the aftermath of Ashling Murphy's murder Parliamentary speaking time was also used by male and female politicians to centre the issue of DSGBV with the then female Minister for Justice announcing a series of criminal justice interventions. One female politician also made precedent in reading into the Parliamentary record the names of twenty-one women killed.¹⁴⁷ Another prominent female politician talked about her own experience as a survivor of sexual assault.¹⁴⁸

Women politicians continue the practice of centring testimony of victims and survivors in the Parliament when they have relinquished their anonymity and can be named in public.¹⁴⁹ This representative work is an example of affective and embodied power of the presence and 'speech acts' of women leaders in politics. Rooting policy asks in lived experience (something articulated in successful ways in civil society campaigns) creates the opportunity for constitutive representation, where the experiences of women politicians ground their articulation of women's interests. Given the traditional masculinist culture of Parliaments, these symbolic and speech acts are significant. As an actor involved in the policy field stated: "so you've got more women raising the issue, but you also have more women talking about the experiences of being harassed, I just think it changes the conversation. When you have that happening in the Dáil." Women leaders choosing to speak about their own experiences of sexual violence created then an 'affective

141 Sawyer et al 2023, p. 2

142 Other murders did not gain as much attention including that of Urantsetseg Tserendorj <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/courts/boy-15-charged-with-murder-of-woman-in-ifsc-stabbing-1.4555966>

143 This politician has continued to advocate for reform of criminal justice procedures on sexual violence <https://www.thejournal.ie/policy-matters-ruth-coppinger-6614545-Feb2025/>

144 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/oireachtas/td-holds-up-thong-in-dail-in-protest-at-cork-rape-trial-comments-1.3696564>

145 Allen 2022

146 Rai 2010, p. 292

147 <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2022-01-19/11/>

148 <https://www.irishexaminer.com/news/politics/arid-40331588.html>

149 <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2024-07-03/16/>

atmosphere’ or emotional register in the Parliamentary chamber that accelerated the work of other politicians and extra parliamentary actors in the DSGBV sector.

Feminist critical actors were key in accelerating ratification of the IC and implementation of its constituent elements, but this required multiple strategies inside and outside of parliament (see table 2). Using *knowledge-based argumentation* that included legal expertise and testimony of DSGBV and feminist civil society and survivors to challenge and reframe resistance to ratification and elaboration-challenging where myths and gender stereotypes circulate and data collection is uneven. Coalition work across parties and within the civil service and criminal justice system to coordinate and seed norms of gender equality in new contexts and in new ways – *that strengthen ministerial initiative to use rules and procedures of the office to push beyond obstacles, accelerate momentum and deliver change*. Rule breaking through symbolic acts and speaking time to share personal testimony on sexual violence on the floor of the Dáil to demonstrate solidarity with victims and survivors of sexual violence. These representative acts and strategies unblocked resistance to the IC and generated a sense of urgency to accelerate the policy trajectory.

Case 2 – Women leaders: Acceleration

Who	Where	What
– Women Ministers of Justice (positional /active power) – Women politicians – Male ally ministers – Extra parliamentary actors’ legal system – Femocrats (women senior civil servants) – Women leaders in criminal justice – DSGBV/ Feminist civil society	– Ministries – Parliament (Dail and Seanad) – Joint Committees – Civil service – Criminal Justice System – Legal system	– Experiential testimony of sexual violence – Reframing debate – Mainstreaming issues – Contest resistance – Legal argumentation
How	Outcome	
– Normpreneurship – Rule breaking: Symbolic Embodied and affective testimony in Parliament – Public protest – Legal expertise – Collaboration – Co-design	– Substantive Representation – Acceleration – Ratification of the Treaty – Cuan – Policy machinery – Infrastructure – Process – Resources	



Conclusion

Conclusion: Women Leaders Amplifying and Accelerating Women's Interests

Women leaders tend to diversify policy agendas, increase their parties' emphasis on social justice issues, and initiate more family-friendly and feminist policies.¹⁵⁰ Their presence in politics matters, as gender equality as a societal and political norm is under pressure in many contexts. While democratic backsliding is not apparent in Ireland, aspects of democratic erosion have been noted¹⁵¹ and gender issues are one of the main sites where liberal democratic values are contested. Progressive women's political leadership is key, especially as women politicians in far-right parties often work against equality goals.¹⁵² Some would also argue that those who dominate parliaments – white male politicians and ministers – are already least equipped to constitute the interests of women and/or ethnic and racial minorities, being furthest from their experiences.¹⁵³

It is important to note that scholars have long debated whether we should link the 'who' of politics with the 'what' of policy making. This includes distinctions made between women's substantive representation and a specifically *feminist* substantive representation.

This includes examples from the cases above of male representatives acting as allies in women's substantive representation, but also the recognition that there are other examples of female representatives not doing so.¹⁵⁴ Given men's overrepresentation in politics, male allies are often essential to women's leadership. Nevertheless, women leaders as individual 'critical actors' as illustrated in the cases here, in working together actively promote gender equality despite their numbers.¹⁵⁵

In the case studies presented here, we can identify where women leaders acted as *amplifiers and accelerants* – on reproductive rights and on the issue of DSGBV to unstick and progress women's interests. This includes evidence of the role of women leaders as critical actors¹⁵⁶ as 'agents of change' who work to advance policy in the context of how other actors may operate as veto players or as 'agents of inertia' that have acted as a 'drag' on advancing gender equality policies. *These included using strategies identified in other contexts of 'knowledge,' 'coalition-building,' 'rulemaking' and rule breaking.*¹⁵⁷

What we know from other contexts is that women leaders are *agents of feminist democratic innovation* but this works best when they have high-level political and material support of feminist political leaders and the broader party-in-government; the feminist knowledge and expertise of bureaucrats; and collaboration with civil society actors in participatory processes and as watchdogs scrutinising policy work.¹⁵⁸ In this sense progressive women leaders must be buoyed by broader political will and commitment, have access and power to articulate women's interests in responsive and inclusive terms.

150 Homola et al 2021

151 Cohen et al 2024

152 Saini et al 2023 ; Begum et al 2025

153 Christoffersen et al 2025 p. 4, 6-7

154 Fields 2022 p. 531-33. ; Begum et al 2024

155 Childs & Krook 2009, p. 138

156 Childs and Krook 2009

157 CCINDLE 2025

158 Lombardo et al 2025

Conditions that facilitate good representation for women includes political institutions that reflect principles of feminist democratic design (including intersectional parliaments/ family friendly parliaments) that enhance women's ability to lead.¹⁵⁹ The need to diversify which women enter political leadership requires then creation of spaces for diverse women leaders to emerge this includes in Ireland measures to facilitate women such as Traveller, migrant background¹⁶⁰, and disabled women.¹⁶¹ Without appropriate measures diverse women leaders will not be recognised as political actors.¹⁶²

The presence of state gender equality machinery and a well-resourced pro-equality civil society are also central components to enacting substantive representation of women. The austerity led decline of equality infrastructure (state) and capacity (civil society) raises the stakes for women leaders to act for women. What is clear is that the strategies and representative acts detailed above demand women politicians take on burdens of representation that other parliamentarians may avoid. This can include being disproportionately subjected to political violence.

International evidence is clear that the best way to support women parliamentarians in advancing gender justice is through strong institutionalisation of gender equality within parliaments.¹⁶³ This includes increasing the *presence of women and other minorities in elected office* in positions of power and influence. It also includes a favourable institutional culture that includes equality commitments.¹⁶⁴ These are required for elaborating the strategies detailed in this report that include: 'knowledge' responses – using feminist knowledge experiential and technical expertise to inform political deliberation and shape policy making; creating inclusive parliamentary spaces where women leaders are capacitated to lead; enable women leaders to occupy positions of positional and active power to drive policy change and to 'coalition-build' among pro-equality allies in committees and consult and collaborate with civil society. As part of these conditions is the institutional presence of a strong civil society network.¹⁶⁵ Feminist leadership has value then in moving us from thin forms of democracy to thicker and more inclusive practices and institutions – by insisting on the right to space, speech and critique by proposing intersectionally inclusive and participatory policy and politics.

159 CCINDLE 2025

160 Cullen and Gough 2022; Cullen 2025

161 Price et al 2025

162 Christofferson et al 2025, p 26

163 Elizondo and Silvestre 2023

164 Childs and Palmieri 2023

165 Lombardo et al 2025

Recommendations

Measures to Increase Intersectional Representation in Parliaments

- In line with the UN CEDAW recommendations to Ireland¹⁶⁶, implement gender quotas and diversity targets at all levels of government to increase the presence and representation of women in *all their diversity* in politics and policy making.
- Ensure party political commitments to gender parity in representation across Oireachtas Committees, including in chairing roles.
- Ensure party political commitments to gender parity within government cabinets, with particular attention to placing women leaders in senior ministries.
- Implement recommendations of the Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament¹⁶⁷ and the Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life¹⁶⁸ to enable women politicians to lead under equitable and safe conditions.
- Implement the recommendations of the Citizens Assembly on Gender Equality and the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality on Women in Leadership and Decision Making.¹⁶⁹
- Explore potential feminist democratic innovations¹⁷⁰ to embed gender equality principles in parliamentary processes and strengthen mechanisms for feminist actors to participate in legislative and political consultations.

Institutionalise Gender Equality Machinery and Processes

- Establish a dedicated and adequately resourced government unit to lead and coordinate gender equality policy, including gender-responsive policymaking, gender mainstreaming, and intersectional policy analysis.
- Elaboration of good practices developed through the Women's Health Taskforce and in the area of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV), particularly in the co-design of policy and engagement with women's organisations and relevant agencies.
- Resource feminist civil society organisations in all their diversity through secure funding, political visibility, and collaboration to advocate and represent women's interests in public life and politics.

166 NWC (2025) National Women's Council Welcomes UN CEDAW Recommendations for Ireland https://www.nwci.ie/learn/article/national_womens_council_welcomes_un_cedaw_recommendations_for_ireland

167 Oireachtas (2021) Forum on a Family Friendly and Inclusive Parliament <https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/members/office-holders/ceann-comhairle/forum-on-a-family-friendly-and-inclusive-parliament/>

168 Oireachtas (2023) Task Force on Safe Participation in Political Life https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/parliamentaryBusiness/other/2024-05-15_task-force-on-safe-participation-in-political-life_en.pdf?

169 Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality (2021) <https://citizensassembly.ie/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/report-of-the-citizens-assembly-on-gender-equality.pdf> Joint Oireachtas Committee on Gender Equality (2022) https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/committee/dail/33/joint_committee_on_gender_equality/reports/2022/2022-12-15_final-report-on-unfinished-democracy-achieving-gender-equality_en.pdf

170 Feminist movements revitalizing Democracy in Europe (FIERCE) <https://fierce-project.eu/>; UNTWIST <https://www.upo.es/investiga/UNTWIST/>; CCINDLE <https://ccindle.org/>

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